

Castlemaine Naturalist

October 2002
Vol 26.9 #293



Blue Devil - a native species. See p 6

Living in a Dry Land, cont.

After two nights in Charleville we travelled on to an overnight stop at Chinchilla - stopping at Cooladdi - one pub/postoffice/store/souvenir shop!

- Roma, where the streets are lined with huge Bottle Trees that were planted early last century and Miles, a crossroads township. Next day we passed through Dalby, stopping for lunch at the very pleasant Botanical Gardens, where we heard lots of Musk Lorikeets, and spotted half a dozen Swift Parrots. We stayed that night in Toowoomba, which is another town we'd like to stay at for a longer period.

Before getting to our grandson's place we visited the Brisbane Botanic Gardens at Mt. Coot-tha, not far from where Simon lives. It is the sort of place to lure me back to Queensland very easily, despite the fact you have to contend with Ibises trying to share your lunch. Doug glanced over his shoulder to find a black beak just reaching over his shoulder for his cake. I found the plantings in these gardens quite fascinating. There is even a specimen of the Wollemi Pine in its own secure cage.

Simon took me walking in the rainforest (in the middle of the first shower they'd had for six weeks) at Mt. Glorious and where I saw for the first time, Lewins Honeyeaters, Brown Gerygones, Yellow-throated Scrub-wrens, Pale Yellow Robins, Northern Yellow Robins, Russet-tailed Thrush, and just missed seeing the Pitta which crossed the path ahead of Simon! Needless to say I probably wouldn't have spotted many of these new-to-me birds without him - particularly ones like the Little Shrike-thrush!

We were taken to the Marine Museum on the Brisbane River when we got back, and Doug thoroughly enjoyed that - and the morning spent with Andrea at an antique market while Simon and I went bush! Later that day they took us to the coast, and a mangrove wetland at Nudgee beach where I added two or three more birds to my growing "twitcher list". The sight of Pied Stilts feeding and reflected in the shallow water, which had a brilliant sheen in the afternoon light, is something that will stay with us for many a long day. We finished the day having fish and chips (from *Doug's Fish Shop*) at the beach front in Sandgate.

Simon also took me to Mt. Coolthia National Park next day to one of the walking tracks - but we didn't manage to spot the Red-winged Wrens we hoped to see. Doug visited a friend, and we finished the day by going up to the summit of Mt. Coot-tha to see the lights of Brisbane - very impressive!

We headed back home - slowly! - via Cunningham's Gap, and Warwick, staying overnight at a small town called Inglewood. There's some interesting spots near there that would be worth a longer visit, too. We stopped next morning on a fishing spot on a river, which wasn't even called a river, but we knew it was a good spot for fish because of the number of pelicans and cormorants there!

Next day we drove through Goondiwindi staying there for an hour or so, then headed for Moree, which is a very attractive place - another one for a longer visit! We'd stopped for a lunch break further back along the road - and found Margaret and Brian Willis about to have their lunch.

We didn't stop at many places along the road. The country didn't look quite as bad as further north and west, but we just kept heading for Gilgandra as the Pilliga Scrub was looking depressingly degraded compared to our last trip, and it's not easy to stop along the road, as the roadsides have been graded to a dangerous curve that we no longer seem to have in Victoria. If someone was heading for you on the wrong side of the road there is just nowhere to go.

We stopped before Gilgandra when we spotted 5 neat cabins on the Tooraweenah crossroads, with a view of the Warrumbungles to the north west. They were only \$45 a night, and bedding included. We've decided we're definitely going to have a week there sometime.

From Gilgandra we headed back to Cobar via Warren, which is a pleasant enough town, but the area around it is the most depressing we went through. It has been cleared for miles for cotton growing.

Nyngan we liked, and stopped on the river for a while. There were quite a few birds but the highlight was a Collared Sparrowhawk I spotted sitting quietly in one of the big eucalypts.

Two more nights at Cobar, one at Hillston, one at Hay and two at Moama, and we decided at last that we really should go home and rescue our animal minders. Even on this part of the trip we saw lots of things we'd missed on the way up - like some picnic spots we'd missed by just a short detour. If you want some recommendations, just ask me! Even Doug has decided that there are things he wants to see and places he wants to visit next time.

Rita Mills

Observations

Yellow Robins. Margaret Badminton spotted a newly fledged Yellow Robin moving around on the ground at Muckleford, but as soon as the parents gave a warning it froze. Later Margaret watched as the parents fed it as it sat on a log.

Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos. Margaret also reported that she had seen the

cockatoos at Yapeen for the first time. There were a number more reports of them in the area. It will be interesting to see if they disperse after the drought breaks, or whether they are here to stay.

The dry Mallee. Ern and Lesley Perkins had been to the Mallee late in August, and Ern reported that the bush looked quite healthy from the road, but a walk soon revealed that much of the understorey, including saltbush and pigface, is dead.

Golden Moths. Penny Garnet has found some Golden Moths on James Track already this year, which is quite early. This year there are a few, last year none, and the year before there were many, but not until October.

Birds at Golf Links Road. Anne van Gemert has had Crested Shrike-tits on the property near the Castlemaine Golf Links. They were easily identified by the distinguishing sound of them tearing at the bark in their search for food. There has also been a large flock of Red-browed Finches on the property.

Shrub Violet. The van Gemerts also have found specimens of Shrub Violet growing on the property, which is a great find. The last Shrub Violets reported from the Muckleford area were lost in a fire that went through the Muckleford bush some 23 years ago.

Sun Orchids. Stuart Morris reported some flowers beginning already on the Sun Orchids at Barkers Creek.

Good Wattle Season. Broadways brought a very impressive array of 23 flowering wattles for the specimen table.

White-browed Treecreeper nesting. Shirley Parnaby saw a bird with food in its beak enter a nest box beside a track in Kalimna, of Vanston Road.

Heron takes fish. Shirley also reports that her fish pond, almost beside her back door, was raided by White-faced Heron. The sole surviving fish has a scar on each side, which seems to indicate that it was clutched in a beak and managed to escape. The pond is now covered with unsightly wire netting, but even so, she surprised the heron standing at the edge, and looking frustrated.

Birds on a morning walk at Hague's Road. Geraldine Harris reports on morning sightings on a walk from the bush paddock down into the garden on 7/9/2002. The backyard seemed to be filled with birds:

Red Wattle Bird	Eastern Rosellas	Yellow Thornbills
Willie Wag-tail	White-plumed Honeyeater	White-throated Treecreeper
Welcome Swallows	Red-rumped Parrots	Yellow Robin
Magpie	New Holland Honeyeater	Sulphur-crested Cockatoos
Raven	White-browed Scrubwrens	Brown Treecreeper
Crimson Rosellas	Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike	Grey Shrike-thrush (nesting under eave)
Fantailed Cuckoo (being chased by White-plumed Honeyeaters).		

Plants in Flower in the Bush Block. Geraldine also lists plants in flower in the bush block. These include Blue Caladenia, Golden Moths (about 15), Early Nancy, Bushy Needlewood, Ploughshare Wattle, Common Hovea, and many Gold-dust Wattles.

Blue Billed Ducks on Lake Joanna. Shirley Parnaby reports that Lake Joanna appears to be attracting a large population of ducks and some interesting visitors on occasions. "As I strolled around the edge with binoculars at the ready last weekend (7 Sept) and my mind set on the possibility of someone doing us a favour and removing all the domestic geese and ducks for Christmas dinners, I spotted a pair of very brown dark ducks, with white-tipped beaks and white rumps, swimming rapidly along in the shelter of the island bank (hospital side). Startled by something, they took off and landed in the creek down near the road bridge - the areas of white underwings confirmed they must be Hardheads. I continued around the south end of the lake and was surprised to see three more dark brown ducks swimming and diving nervously, close to the island (foundry side). I didn't really need binoculars to confirm that they were Blue-billed Ducks - the sun shone on their beaks as they came up from the dives, and their tails were Musk Duck type. Probably all of these visitors were just passing through, but they certainly made my day."

Birds in the Gower School Area

17/8/2002, 3.30 - 4.45 pm. Sunny, cool, light wind.

Galah (3 + 2)	Little Cuckoo-shrike (2 -1 adult, 1imm.)
Australian Raven (2)	Red Wattlebird (heard calling only, several times)
Grey Fantail (1 + 1)	Magpie (heard on several occasions)
Brown Treecreeper (3 + 8)	Varied Sitella (1)
Dusky Woodswallow (1 + 1)	Chestnut-rumped Heathwren (1 + 1)
Superb Fairy-wren (2)	Crimson Rosella (1 + 1)
Eastern Rosella (1 + 2)	Yellow-tufted Honeyeater (multiple single sightings)
Kookaburra (heard)	Grey Shrike-thrush (3 "playing chasey")
Crested Shrike-tit (1)	Fuscous Honeyeater (2 sighted, several heard)
Striated Thornbill (4)	Willie Wagtail (2)

Phillip West

Grey-crowned Babbler Field Day - Boort 2 September 2002

Once common across woodland areas of south eastern Australia, the Grey-crowned Babbler is now extinct in many parts of Victoria and is considered endangered as numbers continue to decline. Margaret Badminton, Jenni Collier and I recently attended a field day to learn why this is so.

Chris Tsaros (Birds Australia) and Doug Robinson (TFN/NRE) both confessed a real passion for and commitment to the survival of these fascinating, socially orientated little birds that live in family groups of 2-15 individuals comprised of 'a breeding pair' and non-breeding 'helpers'.

The Grey-crowned Babbler is distinctive by its call, light coloured crown and grassy

woodland habitat. Most now live on the northern plains in remnant habitat on roadsides and private land. The group we visited were in a remnant stand of very old Black Box with very sparse understorey.

Babbler nests are very obvious large domed shaped bundles of sticks usually within 2-6 m of the ground. They build a number of nests and use them to shelter in all year. Chris once counted 13 babblers in one nest.

Babblers are invertebrate eaters. They use their beaks to find spiders, beetles and larvae under the bark of trees and under pieces of wood on the ground.

Doug presented recent figures showing an alarming decline in numbers of birds, which are now present in only 50% of their former range. One reason for the decline is that babblers are not strong fliers and usually remain within one kilometre of their birthplace. Research shows females are continuing to emigrate from family groups but males are reluctant to venture more than about 300 metres from their home sites. This combined with increased fragmentation of their habitat is having a devastating effect on numbers, as groups become more and more isolated.

Size of groups are also declining with 90% of groups comprised now of less than 10 birds. As communal breeders, the survival of Grey-crowned Babblers is closely linked to the numbers of 'helpers' available to assist with raising young and defending the group. The size of the group is, in turn, dependent on habitat quality and availability.

Roadworks, tree clearing, intense land use and habitat degradation due to irrigation, over grazing and rising groundwater, all threaten the babblers survival. Grey-crowned Babblers are now dependent on proper protection of roadside and privately owned remnant vegetation. Existing habitat must be fenced off, extended and improved and corridors (at least 20 metres wide) created to link existing groups.

PS. At the site we were also shown an Aboriginal cooking mound with clay balls that were once used as heat beads. And we made a quick excursion back to Paul Haws to see his two resident Tawny Frogmouths and also his cat/fox traps that he believes play a big role in the survival of Grey-crowned Babblers on his farm.

Geraldine Harris

In Flower at the Spring Gully Turnoff

The following plants were recorded during the Wednesday afternoon excursion to the Spring Gully/Fryerstown Road corner on 19 Sept, 2002.

Drooping Cassinia
Pink Bells
Gold-dust Wattle
White Marianth
Slender Rice-flower
Hardenbergia

Daphne Heath
Fairy Waxflower
Golden Wattle
Bushy Needlewood
Wiry Mistletoe
Common Beard-heath

Sunndew
Wirilda

Black-anther Flax-lily
Pink Fingers

Plant list supplied by Richard Piesse.

Owl Report

It is now ten years since the Southern Boobooks were discovered in the Botanic Gardens, and over that period I have endeavoured to make weekly observations from March until November, when they disappear over the summer period.

This year the pair have been in the roosting tree from March until the end of July, when usually the breeding season begins. Pellets indicate that the last three years have been difficult in regards food supply - fewer mammal and bird bones - more beetle casings and no yellow beaks of Blackbirds! This year they seem to be struggling, but as the area under the tree is dry and dusty and the visiting dogs scratch enthusiastically, the pellets are often scattered and fragmented. In recent weeks appearances have been irregular, as though undecided about breeding, but at present one owl remains and their usual routine continues.

The collected pellets are sent to the Australian Museum for analysis of diet - in particular for the appearance of the bones of birds, bats and other small mammals.

Shirley Parnaby

Is it a weed?

It is sometimes difficult to know whether or not a plant is a native, or introduced. Generally, a plant is considered to be a native plant if

- it is not known to be native to any other part of the world, and/or
- it was collected soon after European settlement

A plant growing in pristine bushland is also likely to be a native.

For many years, native plant growers grew *Pavonia hastata*, a shrubby member of the mallow family. It was presumed to be native because it was collected by some very early botanical expeditions. It is now considered be an introduced species. One of the routes to Australia was via South America, and it was brought to Australia by some of the first settlers.

Waterbuttons (*Cotula coronopifolia*) is a bright yellow flowered daisy that grows beside steams and in swamps. It has a cosmopolitan distribution, and has usually been considered to be an introduced species. However, it appears to have a stable distribution, and there is speculation that it is a native.

Blue Devil is a beautiful plant of the local grasslands. It was formerly called *Eryngium rostratum*, and thought to be a native of both South America and Australia. A close examination of the American and Australian plants indicated two closely related species, and the Australian plants are now *Eryngium ovinum*. So our Blue Devil is now an solely Australian species.

Ern Perkins

From the business meeting

The Highway Cleanup - should it continue? The CFNC undertook to remove litter from a stretch of the Pyrenees Highway, for a minimum term of three years. We are now at the end of this time. Should we continue? Members will be asked for an opinion at the next meeting. In the meanwhile, we will have a cleanup session on the Saturday after the November meeting.

A PA for meetings. A public address system was trialed at the September meeting. Thirteen members responded to the survey about its effectiveness.

Of those who have difficulty in hearing, six said that the sound was much better, and four said it was better. Three members with good hearing responded. Of these, two said the sound was better with the PA. Four of those responding thought that the sound was a too loud. The Club is getting a price for a PA, possibly with a radio microphone.

Welcome to Phil Collier and Robin Garnett to the Club.

Cape Broom removal. Two very well attended and successful boom removal mornings have taken place. Congratulations to those taking part.

.....

Disclaimer - The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the Club.

2002 Committee - E Perkins (President) ph 5472 3124, C Morris (VP and Grievance Officer), G Broadway (Secretary) ph 5472 2513, H van Gemert (Treasurer), R Mills (Newsletter Ed & Public Officer), M Badminton, G Harris, B Maund, M Oliver and R Piesse.

Subscriptions for 2002 -

Ordinary membership: Single \$22, Family \$30

Pensioner or student: Single \$19, Family \$24

Supporting \$31.

The subscription includes postage of the *Castlemaine Naturalist*.

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club, PO Box 324, Castlemaine. Incorporation #A0003010B

Castlemaine Naturalist September 2002 - Program

General meetings are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) hall at 8.00 pm on the second Friday of each month, except January.

Excursions leave promptly at the times stated, usually on the Saturday after the general meeting. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days. Also note that outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions.

Business meetings are held at 27 Doveton Street on the 4th Thursday of each month, except December, at 7.30 pm. All members are invited to attend.

Visitors are welcome at club meetings and excursions.

Wed Oct 9. *Wednesday Afternoon excursion no 4.* Leaders: Ken and Maureen Dredge. Octopus (opposite the Castle Motel, Duke St) at 4.00 pm.

Fri Oct 11. Dr David McLaren *The biological control of weeds.* Dr McLaren is from the Keith Turnbull Institute. 8.00 pm at the Uniting Church hall, Lyttleton Street.

Sat Oct 12. *Cape Broom removal at the Botanic Gardens.* A follow up from the brush cutting. We will aim to remove the broom plants that were missed by the brush cutter. 9.00 am at the Froomes Road/Mary St car park. Bring gloves, rake, loppers and morning tea.

Sat Oct 12. *Mt Alexander and Great Dividing Trail.* A walk along part of the Great Dividing Trail on Mt Alexander. A walk of 3-4 km. Carry afternoon tea. Leader: Richard Piesse. Meet at Chirp, 13 Mostyn St at 1.30 pm.

Wed Oct 16. *Wednesday Afternoon excursion no 5.* Leader: Margaret Panter. Octopus at 4.00 pm.

Thurs Oct 24. *U3A/CFNC bird watching at Pennyweight Flat.* Meet at the Octopus (opposite the motel, Duke St) at 9.30 am. Leader is Chris Morris.

Thurs Oct 24. *Business Meeting.* 7.30 pm at 27 Doveton St. All members are invited.

Fri 25, Sat 26 & Sun 27 Oct. *VFNCA camp at Ballarat.* The Victorian Field Naturalists Clubs Association Spring Camp will be held this year at Ballarat and conducted by the Field Naturalists Club of Ballarat.. There are full and half-day excursions on Saturday, and excursions on Sunday morning. On Friday evening there will be an introductory slide show, and the Ballarat FNC 50th Anniversary Dinner will be held on Saturday evening, when the guest speaker will be Tim O'Ombrain, who will speak on *Local Conservation Issues*. Information and booking sheets can be obtained from E Perkins.

Fri Nov 8. *Lichens with Sharon Ford.* UCA hall at 8.00 pm.

Sat Nov 9. *Highway Cleanup.* Meet near Tate's Carriage Works, at the Willy Milly Road/Pyrenees Highway corner at 8.30 am.

Sat Nov 9. *Bullarto Lichens.* Leave Chirp at 1.30 sharp. Leader is Sharon Ford.

Tues Dec 10. *Bridal Creeper - integrated control techniques.* A seminar by Dr Raelene Kwong, leader Biological Services Team, Keith Turnbull Institute. Presented by the Friends of the Box Ironbark Forest and Mt Alexander Shire Council. Ray Bradfield Rooms at 7.30 pm.

Fri Dec 13. *Members and Visitors Night.* Members (and visitors) are asked to contribute a small item. Bring a plate for supper.